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# Rebellion and Agrarian Tensions in Sierra Leone

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*This paper assesses the extent to which customary governance in Sierra Leone can be held responsible for an increasingly unstable two-class agrarian society. A case is made for regarding the civil war (1991–2002) as being an eruption of long-term, entrenched agrarian tensions exacerbated by chiefly rule. Evidence is presented to suggest that the main rebel movement embodied in its plans to reorganize agricultural production some grasp of these longer-term agrarian problems. Postwar attempts to implement co-operative farming and mining are then described. The failure of these schemes is linked to the reinstitution of customary land law and local patronage systems. Current struggles over land now involve international capital. Deep agrarian reforms will be required as the price of keeping international capital engaged in the Sierra Leone countryside.*

**Keywords:** agriculture, land tenure, youth, civil wars, Sierra Leone

## RURAL SOCIETY BEFORE AND DURING BRITISH COLONIALISM

Tensions between chiefs and subjects – and in particular youths – in Sierra Leone are endemic to an agrarian order that emerged from the West African social world shaped by the Atlantic slave trade. To fully appreciate this, one must understand how the chieftaincy institution developed in the nineteenth century. Broadly speaking, there were two kinds of chiefs. Those who could be termed ‘warlords’ lived mainly from controlling, protecting or raiding the major trade routes from the Upper Niger to the Atlantic. These warlords were supported by bands of young men skilled in the arts of bush warfare. In communities around the Gola Forest in the early nineteenth century, prospects for young men were limited. One option was the life of a fighter. Another was a kind of farm serfdom, in villages often vulnerable to raiding or kidnap. Captives would be sold into the Atlantic slave trade to Cuba, a thriving business in the Gallinas estuary (Pujehun District) and at Cape Mount (Liberia) until mid-century (Jones 1983).

Elsewhere, the slave trade was in decline, and in these districts agrarian chiefs diversified from supplying food to slave vessels into meeting the food needs of the infant colony at Sierra Leone. In particular, Susu, Mandinka and Fula overlords maintained large rice plantations in the littoral zone north of Freetown. William Cooper Thomson, an emissary from Freetown to Futa Jallon in the 1840s, passed through this area and commented on the organization of rural social life (Thomson 1846). The slaves lived semi-independently in farm villages, and worked at least two days a week in their own interest. Relations between slaves and owners were relatively cordial. Thomson passed through in a period of dearth – the result of successive years of locust attack – and notes that the overlords had relocated from their trade-route towns, temporarily, to live with their better-supplied slaves.

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When the British took over the interior of Sierra Leone in 1896, they clashed with a number of belligerent chiefs of the warlord sort. Fearing that Freetown law would free their slaves and destroy the basis of their wealth, chiefs from the centre and east of the country organized an uprising to stop British expansion. Defeated by British troops, many of the rebels were hung or deposed. The British lacked the resources to rule the interior directly and sought to recruit a new class of loyal chiefs. For a time, there were few among the Mende who would volunteer for the task (Fenton 1943). The benefits were uncertain, until it became clear that the British were prepared quietly to allow some of the old practices to remain in place (chiefs were allowed to command forced labour, and although slave dealing and slave raiding were banned, the status of existing slaves was unchanged). Local courts in Pujehun District were busy with cases for the recovery of runaway slaves into the 1920s (Grace 1977). But eventually the League of Nations anti-slavery committee intervened and forced the colonial government of Sierra Leone to emancipate the remaining slaves. The slaves were finally freed on 1 January 1928.

On the Liberian border rates of slavery remained high, prior to emancipation (reaching 50 per cent in some chiefdoms along the Liberian border). Closer to the economic powerhouse of Freetown, however, slavery had declined to around 10–15 per cent of the population by the end of the nineteenth century (Grace 1977). In effect, slave status mutated towards serfdom, and then towards a free peasantry, as cultivators laid claim to land they had long cultivated. In a land-surplus economy, there was little interest among the small group of overlords in preventing these *de facto* land appropriations. This was because, by and large, the children of the chiefs went into trade, or pursued education, competing for jobs in the modern urban economy, and ceased to be interested in working the land, except perhaps as a retirement project. In any case, grateful ex-slaves were often generous with their crops. An informal social contract emerged as the basis for social harmony – a certain amount of tribute was paid in return for tacit acceptance that those who tilled soil would now be recognized as its *de facto* owners.

## CONTROL OVER LAND AND LABOUR PRIOR TO THE CIVIL WAR

Staple food crop farming (based on rice) in Sierra Leone suffers intensive peak labour demands, and large farms need highly coordinated group labour. If individuals or projects want to cope with these bottlenecks, they have to hire labourers (often other farmers in the community), paying either in cash or mortgaging part of the harvest. Additionally, food for the day is required – labourers will down tools if food is insufficient or sub-standard (Richards 1986). Under customary rules, only chiefs have the right to call for the obligatory community labour. Elders sometimes access group labour as patrons and protectors of labour-sharing co-operatives. Polygamists with large upland farms entrap labourers by encouraging wives to take up relationships with likely young men. Court cases are then used to punish the adulterer, with farm labour offered as an alternative for the large cash fines demanded. Spikes in case frequencies coincide with labour peaks on upland rice farms (Mokuwa et al. 2011). With available labour tied down by custom, it is almost impossible to hire farm help at busy periods without paying exorbitantly.

Similar difficulties arise around access to land. Although population densities in rural Sierra Leone have not been high – historically, and even today, land remains available for those who want to put it to agricultural use – a stranger seeking land can only access it, under the customary system, through becoming the recognized client of a ‘big man’ from one of the land-owning lineages. This patron–client relationship requires the stranger to support his patron in a range of ill-defined ways. Part of the harvest and help with labour at peak periods may be expected, in addition to material contributions to important family events and political loyalty

during elections. The problem here lies in the unspecific nature of the duty of support. It is hard to plan farming as a profitable business in the face of open-ended claims by landowners. A stranger finds it easy to acquire access to land initially, but may find *ad hoc* requests from the landowner racking up; for example, when a political campaign looms, or the stranger's harvest looks abundant. Reform of land tenancy – for example, making short-hold leasing a routine and efficient matter of contract, enforceable in the local courts – was resisted both by the British and subsequent governments on the grounds that custom is a flexible instrument attuned to the mentality of villagers. The flexibility lies mainly on one side only, however, and is to the disadvantage of incoming strangers proffering only their own labour. The local tenant farmer's position is different from that of an international investor in farm land, who can threaten to remove capital, machines and know-how if an informal bargain goes sour.

To make the territory more profitable, the British colonial powers came up with a post-Second World War growth plan for agriculture. The Childs Plan envisaged a near doubling in agricultural production, including cocoa, coffee, piassava and palm kernels<sup>1</sup> (Lewis 1954, 205). It was acknowledged by the British that palm kernel production would not be prioritized by the local farmers over subsistence rice production, but it was expected that expansion of (feeder) roads and milling facilities would eventually lead farmers to become fully engaged in the cash-crop economy, and thus to give up arable land presently used for upland rice production to plant palm-oil trees (Lewis 1954, 206). To realize this massive leap forward in production, the British depended on two sets of institutions:

The [district] councils' plans are carried out, of course, in the main by the *chiefs working through their time-honoured system of allocating work and duties*. But other agencies exist to push forward the plan. The need to encourage Co-operation in Sierra Leone was finally realised by the authorities in 1939; until then, neither the state of education nor the demand for crops, other than palm kernels and piassava, seemed to make Co-operation practicable. (Lewis 1954, 213; our emphasis).

Following the enactment of an Ordinance and the appointment in 1949 of a Registrar of Co-operative Societies, co-operative societies and co-operation-based enterprises were now created. For the following four decades – whether under colonial, post-independent government or World Bank tutelage – some co-operatives managed to function and blossom, but even these found themselves, sooner rather than later, turned into vehicles for rural elite interests. Others suffered from fraud and quickly collapsed.

Elite control over land and labour thus remained, whether within the 'time-honoured' traditional sphere of production or within the new co-operative arrangements. Chiefs and elites continued to exploit a marginalized class of young people belonging to weak lineages, but now through the cash-crop production supplied through co-operatives as well as through subsistence production of upland rice. Central government also began to cream off its share through monopoly trading instruments known as marketing boards. The rural labouring classes of young people from former slave backgrounds found themselves doubly exploited – by tradition at home, and through government taxes on agricultural production. Some migrated as labourers to alluvial diamond districts, but even there the land-owning chiefly classes controlled mining land through the 'time-honoured' rules, disciplining production and extracting wealth through 'custom', alongside the government's own violence-based methods of taxing flows of mineral wealth (Reno 1995). It was among these groups of doubly exploited young people – some still

<sup>1</sup> Palm kernels alone accounted for about 75 per cent of income through export of agricultural produce in Sierra Leone in 1948 (Lewis 1954, 205).

residing in their farming villages, some working in the alluvial diamond fields – that the RUF found a number of willing recruits. The RUF's slogan of 'no more master, no more slave' – whether sincerely or cynically intended – activated long-term and commonly shared resentments among the rural labouring classes, as will now be elaborated..

## CIVIL WAR IN SIERRA LEONE

The civil war in Sierra Leone began in 1991, when a small insurgent movement – the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) – infiltrated the remote eastern and southeastern districts of the country from Liberia. A weak government army struggled to halt RUF advance and was shored up by a Liberian refugee militia (ULIMO) and detachments of Nigerian and Guinean troops. After a military coup, and the re-equipping and reinforcement of the army, the RUF were forced back into forest fastnesses on the border, and the government declared a Unilateral Ceasefire (December 1993). The RUF responded by launching a guerrilla campaign from secure forest camps, threatening widespread panic. Civilian groups in the capital (Freetown) seized an opportunity to get rid of the weakened military regime by demanding elections. International support for a policy of elections-before-peace prevented the RUF to take part in these elections. The freshly elected civilian government then sidelined the army in favour of civil defence forces loyal to the new regime, many of them trained by South African mercenaries. Mutinous soldiers seized the capital and offered a power-sharing deal to the RUF. After less than a year, Nigerian troops deposed the junta and drove the RUF back into the bush. International struggles over diamond mining helped to rearm both the RUF and civil defence forces, and the country was consumed by guerrilla fighting between two sets of non-state forces. Order was restored by UN intervention forces (including the Guinean and Nigerian army peacekeeping units) backed by a British military operation designed to secure the capital and airport. The RUF accepted a peace deal centred on offering demobilization and reintegration opportunities. The war was declared over in 2002, and a large international peace-building effort commenced. In rural areas, this involved reinstalling key institutions of customary traditional authority, seen above as a cause of the war.

A burgeoning literature, assuming explanatory standpoints as diverse as methodological individualism and original sin, has struggled to find agreement about the 'causes' of the war in Sierra Leone. This, we will argue, is because the war cannot be detached from its larger socio-economic and historical context. The two most favoured explanations centre on the idea that the RUF was driven by an inherently violent youth urban underclass (Abdullah 1997), and the (at times linked) claim that fighting was motivated by material greed, specifically, the looting of the alluvial diamonds in which the country once abounded (Smillie et al. 2000; Collier 2001). We will briefly explain why we find neither argument to be well supported by evidence.

Abdullah's 'lumpen' hypothesis, proposed after fieldwork in eastern Freetown in 1996, is not borne out by data on the origins of RUF cadres from demobilization studies. Humphreys and Weinstein (2004) randomly sampled 1,000 ex-combatants from all factions and a civilian control group of 200. Army recruits were often urban, but both RUF and civil defence cadres were predominantly rural in origins. The single most frequent occupation of CDF fighters was farming. Schooling was the single most common occupation at recruitment into the RUF, followed by farming, but this is probably because the movement targeted village schools in attacks. Many of the children rounded up in these school raids will have had a farm background. Since fighters risen through the ranks had considerable influence over the movement's ideas and strategies, we might anticipate agrarian issues to surface in its thinking. We provide evidence to confirm this expectation below.

*Table 1.* Reports of diamond mining by armed personnel associated with the Sierra Leone war, March 1991 to December 1993

| <i>Faction/district</i> | <i>National army</i>  | <i>Government militia</i> | <i>Rebel forces</i>  |
|-------------------------|---|---------------------------|--|
| Bo                      | No reports 1991–3   | No reports 1991–3         | No reports 1991–3  |
| Kailahun                | No reports 1991–3   | No reports 1991–3         | No reports 1991–3  |
| Kenema                  | No reports 1991–3   | No reports 1991–3         | No reports 1991–3  |
| Kono                    | 1. 1992: SLA [Sierra Leone army] abandon posts to mine, FN p. 336<br>2. 1993: SLA and ECOMOG [West African economic community monitoring group – a peacekeeping force] encourage citizens in Tombolu and Koidu to return and mine, pp. 339–40                             | No reports 1991–3         | No reports 1991–3<br><br>Note: RUF [Revolutionary United Front] infiltrated Kono District in 1991, and took over whole district in 1992; no reports of mining throughout this period |
| Pujehun                 | 1. 1992: Gbojibu became ‘one of their [SLA] mining villages’, p. 497<br>2. 1992–3: A lot of SLA soldiers are mining in the east of the district, p. 484<br>3. 1993: SLA began to engage in mining at Makpele Chiefdom and continued until after the 1996 election, p. 501 | No reports 1991–3         | 1. April 1991: RUF/NPFL [National Patriotic Front of Liberia] engaged in diamond mining at Gbahama and Baguihun, p. 487  |

*Source:* Smith et al. (2004).

International (illicit) military assistance to the armed factions in Sierra Leone centred on securing mineral resources. The assumption of various parties was that to be on the winning side of this war would lead to rich mining concessions. Unsurprisingly, international debate about peacekeeping was dominated by the idea that this was a war driven by ‘greed, not grievance’. Analysts found some numerical support for this idea, but perhaps only because a prolonged war requires resources, and diamond mining kept all parties equipped to fight.

One valuable data source to test the significance of diamonds as a driver of the war is the conflict-mapping exercise undertaken by the organization No Peace Without Justice, as a comprehensive background document for the Special Court on War Crimes in Sierra Leone (Smith et al. 2004). The data are derived from eyewitness accounts from over 400 informants resident in the various war-affected districts of Sierra Leone at relevant periods.

We have coded these data for the five main diamond-rich districts of Sierra Leone. Table 1 summarizes all eyewitness reports of mining activities by armed personnel in the first phase of the war – March 1991 to December 1993 (the date of the NPRC government’s unilateral ceasefire). It is striking that there are so few such reports in this period – only six in all, for a report in which eyewitness testimony occupies about two-thirds of a 600-page document.

Second, only one of these early reports implicates the RUF, the instigator of the conflict, the other five being credited to the government army. Reports of diamond mining are much more numerous in the later stages of the war. But to be causal, diamond mining would have to be present at the outset in substantial amounts. Thus the most comprehensive observer-based survey of the events of the war in Sierra Leone provides little if any support for the primacy of 'greed' for diamonds as an explanation for the origins of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Better insight, we claim, can be gained by examining carefully some of the rebel movement's own statements about why it fought the war, and collating these with testimony from opponents or victims of the movement. Foday Sankoh, the rebel leader, died before making his major submission to the Special Court for War Crimes in Sierra Leone. But a number of cadres provided accounts of RUF motivations, either while the war was in progress or shortly thereafter, before further investigation was rendered difficult or of dubious reliability by the widespread fear of war crimes prosecution. Evidence from cadres is at its most secure when confirmed by the accounts of civilians held by the movement or opposing civil defence fighters (Richards 2005a,b; Peters 2006; Peters 2011).

Cadres sometimes testified that they joined the movement as the result of rough justice by local courts, or the actions of predatory chiefs in settling informal disputes. The role of local courts in driving low-status rural young men into vagrancy, and thus putting them at risk of abduction by the RUF, is discussed more fully in Mokuwa et al. (2011), where a statistically significant connection is established between court cases based on marriage disputes (a stated source of grievance) and seasonal labour demands on large upland rice farms owned by polygamously married village elders. The RUF not infrequently targeted chiefs and local court buildings in early attacks. Independent eyewitness testimonies (Richards 2005a) confirm that the movement ran its own justice system based on popular moots, as advocated in the Green Book of Col. Gaddafi. An eyewitness report of RUF advance into Pujehun District in 1991 describes an occasion on which 'the RUF leader visited the town [of Gbaa], gathered hundreds of civilians for a meeting and stated that the RUF were peacemakers, coming to free people from slavery' (Smith et al. 2004, 487). Elsewhere, the RUF made use of the slogan 'no more master, no more slave' (RUF/SL 1995).

Below, we will show that as the struggle continued, the RUF, after initially claiming to confront the corruption associated with a one-party regime, began to develop a concern with the agrarian institutional 'backwardness' underpinning the grievances and sense of injustice of many of the rural recruits that it brought into the movement.

## THE RUF: IMPLEMENTING A RADICAL RURAL REFORM AGENDA?

The overwhelming majority of RUF cadres were from rural backgrounds. In particular, those conscripted (either as voluntary recruits or by force) during the first three years of the war (and known as junior commandos) came to play a significant role in the movement. Almost all came from rural districts in eastern Sierra Leone. But prior to that, the RUF leadership, after its return from revolutionary training in Libya in the late 1980s, settled in up-country Sierra Leone to further organize its revolution (Abdullah 1997, 66), and almost certainly became aware of the dire situation in which many young people in rural and semi-rural or mining locations found themselves as a result of customary injustices and patrimonial squeeze. This squeeze was particularly bad in Kailahun District, a hotbed of opposition to the then-incumbent regime.

<sup>2</sup> As distinct from explaining how diamonds served to prolong the conflict, by keeping the belligerents supplied with weapons during later stages.



The Stevens government cut off the trickle of resources it otherwise allocated to local administration as punishment for local recalcitrance. Chiefs in Kailahun appear in some cases to have made good their losses from government by redoubling exactions on local youth.

Therefore, it is not surprising that agriculture (and the way in which agrarian labour was organized) became a topic of central importance for the RUF, as it pondered ways to develop its revolution from an inauspicious base. The military tacticians among the leadership were mainly concerned with rice production as a necessity to keep fighters in the front. Others cadres (perhaps having suffered rural injustices and labour exploitation themselves) understood agricultural production under the RUF in terms more akin to socialist agrarian collectivization:

[A] central point of the revolution was the great attention on the importance of rice farming in Sierra Leone. The RUF promoted rice farming, even in the front line. It always looked out for seed rice to take it along. This rice was given to the civilians who were living in RUF territory. They had to make this 'state farm' or more accurately put 'town farm' on which they had to work besides the work on their own farms. It was a cooperative which was meant to supply for whoever needed it. (. . .) We took this idea about group action from the Green Book but we adapted it to the Sierra Leone case. (ex-RUF commander, quoted in Peters, 2011, 102)

It is important to stress, however, that the RUF was not a movement with a strong agrarian orientation at the outset. It initially positioned itself to overthrow the one-party regime of the All Peoples Congress and reform the state. Rural injustices centred on customary institutions and their abuse of control over land and labour do not figure in any major way in the *Basic Document of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL): The Second Liberation of Africa* (1989), even though (by repute) this was document largely drafted by students from the country's agricultural university (Njala University College).<sup>3</sup>

An agrarian aspect surfaces in the major RUF document *Footpaths to Democracy: Towards a New Sierra Leone* (RUF/SL 1995). By this time, the RUF was incarcerated in the forest. The document claims this had been an eye-opening experience for the small elite leadership. The authenticity of this document has been questioned by some (Gberie 2005). It was probably ghost-written by two Ghanaians – veterans of Gaddafi's student movement – working on contract to the UK-based conflict resolution agency International Alert. On the other hand, it almost certainly used first-hand material supplied by the RUF leadership, and brought back from a first visit by one of the authors to the movement in the bush in Sierra Leone in mid-1995. Thus the contribution of amanuenses is no reason to dismiss its content out of hand. Finnström (2006, 218) argues, in relation to the manifestos of the Lord Resistance Army in Uganda, that 'authenticity is not about where a piece of paper has been written, but rather where it is disseminated and discussed, and where its meaning is mediated and reformulated'.

In *Footpaths*, the marginalization of rural and agrarian Sierra Leone is clearly brought forward as a theme:

The land has been despoiled and the irresponsible and corrupt mining magnates leave the villagers only with the gift of pits and craters that breed mosquitoes, malaria and cholera. Farmlands are destroyed in the insatiable quest for diamonds and gold. The only way out of their cringing poverty is for the youth and able to yield to the false attraction of urban and cosmopolitan life.

<sup>3</sup> One of these students – Fayia Musa – later became the RUF spokesman on agricultural matters.

No more shall the rural countryside be reduced to hewers of wood and drawers of water for urban Freetown. That pattern of exploitation, degradation and denial is gone forever. No RUF/SL combatant or civilian will countenance the re-introduction of that pattern of raping the countryside to feed the greed and caprice of the Freetown elite and their masters abroad. In our simple and humble ways we say, 'No more slave and no more master.' It is these very exploitative measures instituted by so-called central governments that create the conditions for resistance and civil uprising.

By this time (1995), the RUF had realised the importance of organizing food production for movement survival (raiding was no longer enough). Also, it was by this stage numerically dominated by fighters with rural backgrounds, many acutely aware of the way in which chiefs, elders and local courts could at times deprive them of crops, land and labour on trumped-up charges, apparently at will.

Several former RUF fighters claimed that most of the (larger) jungle-based camps in the RUF Phase II guerilla campaign from 1994 to 1997 had their own farms nearby, where all fighters (rank-and-file and commander alike) were required to work. In areas under RUF control for large parts of the war (notably Kailahun district in the east, and later Bombali and Tonkolili district in the north), the RUF aimed to introduce seed banks operating on a low-interest basis. It was also compulsory for civilians to work one or more days a week (varying by location) on a 'community' or 'state' farm, on which local food security was based:<sup>4</sup>

*Every base got its own [rice] swamp. In a circle of about five miles around the base no civilians were living. Beyond that civilians were living in villages under the control of combatants. There were the [rice] swamps located where both the civilians and the combatants worked. (ex-RUF fighter, quoted in Peters 2011, 105)*

*During my time with the RUF we had to make rice swamps. But we, the fighters, and the civilians had separated swamps. If you had a friend among the civilians he might help you, but you could not force him. (ex-RUF fighter, quoted in Peters 2011, 106)*

*I went to Koindu in 1994 and stayed there up to Lomé [peace accord, 1999]. There the G5 [RUF military-civilian branch] instructed us to organize ourselves in groups so that we could work on a rotational basis on our own private farms. And some of the work on your farm was on an individual basis. Then there was one day in the week that we had to work on the government [RUF] farm. The harvest was for the commander. So the other six days were for yourself, and we did not have to pay taxes. Sometimes it was impossible to farm because of the kamajoi [CDF] threat. (civilian in RUF territory, quoted in Peters 2011, 168)*

*During the war we had individual farms and rebel farms. We had to work on the rebel farms about five times a month. The seed rice was provided by the fighters during the war. (civilian in RUF territory, quoted in Peters 2011, 168)*

Agrarian-oriented ideological training in the RUF seems to have been especially effective among combatants associated with the base camp (the Zogoda) in Koya Chiefdom (South Kambui Forest Reserve) in the period 1994–96, but the ideological element (rather than the pragmatic necessity for rice farming) eroded when the War Council (the political wing within the RUF) was separated from the movement in the field as a result of the failed 1996 peace

<sup>4</sup> The existence of these seed-banks and the compulsory (if essential) work by civilians on these state farms once every week or fortnight is confirmed by a number of civilians who lived in RUF territory during the war (Peters 2011).



accord, and the destruction of the main forest bases by the Executive Outcomes-supervised CDF from September to October 1996 (see Smith et al. 2004).<sup>5</sup> When the RUF joined the military AFRC junta in Freetown from April 1997 onwards, it no longer had any effective ideological direction. Nevertheless, some of the early conscripts remained strong believers in rural reform and co-operative farming, acquired within the context of earlier ideological training, and restarted 'state farms' in the latter part of the war.

#### AGRARIAN OPPORTUNITIES UNDER DEMOBILIZATION

The extent to which the rural/agrarian reform agenda of the RUF was seriously entertained is tested, in our analysis, by examining what some cadres did with agrarian demobilization opportunities offered as a result of the Abuja peace accords of November 2000. This agreement provided for the demobilization and reintegration of a war-weary but undefeated rebel force via a skills training programme intended to prepare fighters for civilian employment (the demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programme, henceforth DDR). Agrarian options under the Abuja agreements were limited. Training in agricultural skills was only patchily available. Competent providers had more applicants than they could process. The job start-up kits associated with agriculture were less valuable than those for other trades, and often arrived late or not at all (Richards et al. 2004). Given the repeated claims that the RUF was an urban lumpen movement oriented towards mining, this weakness should have mattered less to RUF cadres than to their opponents, the more obviously rural 'hunter' militia. In fact, demand for agrarian skills was surprisingly strong among some ex-RUF fighters. We describe how this demand was connected to the movement's declared agrarian ideological orientation and how several RUF farm settlement schemes emerged from demobilization, only later to collapse, in part due to lack of effective support, including difficulties over land access. This introduces a reflection on how the customary agrarian institutional order reinstated during the postwar reconstruction process may continue to provoke future episodes of agrarian disorder.

The DDR process picked up pace in 2001 and by the end of the 2002 a total of 72,490 combatants disarmed (NCDDR 2004), with the RUF contributing a third of that number and the CDF accounting for about half.<sup>6</sup> The DDR process in Sierra Leone has been portrayed by the UN as a success, and a model to be replicated in other countries (Olonisakin 2008). A closer examination of the programme reveals a number of shortcomings (Richards et al. 2004; Peters 2007). These are found in both the military-oriented disarmament and demobilization components as well as in the development-oriented reintegration component.

Flaws in design and implementation of DDR particularly affected the poorest groups – irregulars and/or rank-and-file fighters with a rural background. The 'one (serviceable) weapon per fighter' condition for DDR validation, while successful in gathering most of the weapons, disadvantaged substantial numbers of fighters. For instance, many CDF fighters fought with cutlasses or single-barrel shotguns, and these were unacceptable to the UN peacekeeping force for validation as a genuine ex-combatant. Moreover, once it became clear that weapons

<sup>5</sup> While the RUF War Council was negotiating the eventually abortive peace accord in Abidjan, the battlefield commanders took full control of decisions on the ground. Sankoh never went back to his cadres in the bush, being detained by Nigerian authorities in February 1997, and subsequently handed over to the Sierra Leone government, to be tried for treason. His death sentence was annulled after renewed fighting brought the RUF into Freetown in January 1999.

<sup>6</sup> The balance were members and former members of the Sierra Leone government army (Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces [RSLMF]) not absorbed within the reconstituted postwar army (known as the Sierra Leone Armed Forces [SLAF]).

represented a key asset, some commanders ordered rank-and-file soldiers under their command to hand over these before DDR commenced, relying on the authority of rank, or manipulating rumours about penalties likely to be exacted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and (in particular) the UN Special Court for War Crimes in Sierra Leone. Gathered guns were then apparently redistributed, to cronies and clients, thus enabling non-combatants to gain DDR benefits at the expense of many rank-and-file fighters. The true extent of this fraud is unknown, but it was widely alleged, and appears to have affected women fighters most of all (Richards et al. 2004).

The reintegration component of the DDR programme suffered from major flaws which – again – particularly affected fighters with a rural background. Frequently, ex-combatants awaiting training or a (much delayed) tool kit after disarmament and demobilization temporarily returned to their rural homes or mining camps. The availability of the reintegration package was announced by public radio, but the message often went unheard or was a false call. After two or three fruitless trips to a sometimes distant regional DDR centre, many ex-fighters gave up the attempt to collect entitlements, unwilling to waste time and resources on further fruitless journeys, after which DDR agents or contracted service providers presumably wrote down and appropriated the uncollected items.

Also, the reintegration packages hardly reflected the occupational labour division in the country. Only about 30 per cent of the population works outside farming, but about half of the ex-combatants opted for the much more attractively designed vocational training package, which promised to turn them into carpenters, builders, car mechanics or even computer engineers in a matter of months. Of course, no training programme on Earth can turn an unskilled labourer into a competent practitioner of a skilled craft within months, and DDR officials were sometimes frank that the programme was not really a skills-training initiative, but a means to separate fighters from their guns. It should come as no surprise that few of the trainees found work using their new-found ‘skill’, or to discover that most ex-combatants were then forced to sell their tool kits and revert to farming or unskilled labour in diamond pits.

Nevertheless, despite the greater initial attractiveness of vocational skill packages 15 per cent of the ex-combatants opted for agriculture, equivalent to nearly 11,000 fighters. DDR officials took no records of factional affiliation, so it is impossible to find out what the uptake was between RUF and CDF. It is likely that many of the ex-combatants opting for agriculture were older ex-CDF fighters, involved in farming before the war, and now expecting to return to their communities. The farming package was based on seeds and farming tools, and must have looked attractive to those with land entitlements, some command over (their own) labour and an assured welcome in their communities.<sup>7</sup> But there was also a small but not insignificant group of ex-RUF combatants opting for the agricultural package, and it is these we focus upon here, since it is their experience that gives both a glimpse of the RUF attitude to agriculture and the real difficulties faced by young, would-be farmers, outside the ‘traditional’ sector.

Rather than taking the package to go their own individual way, a number of these ex-RUF combatants decided to group together, bundle resources and start collective farming projects. Their ideas about collective farming, it will be shown below, reflected debates within the RUF about what the agrarian sector might need in a postwar, RUF-ruled, Sierra Leone. Ideas were shaped, in part, by what the movement had tried to implement in areas it controlled during the war. An orientation to collective or co-operative farming solutions also reflected wartime bonding within the movement. Some cadres made explicit acknowledgement that fighting and

<sup>7</sup> The main bottleneck during the immediate postwar rehabilitation of farming-based livelihoods was sufficient access to labour, to clear farm plots overgrown by years of neglect.

surviving for over 10 years as members of small armed units had generated (at level of squad and platoon) significant collective sentiment that might be useful in making an impact on an envisaged postwar world.

All projects to be described here were led by a core group of two or three seasoned fighters well exposed to, and sometimes instrumental in, the shaping of RUF ideology. Rank-and-file combatants – some reunited with wartime commanders – joined these projects in order to channel DDR entitlements towards what they saw as a longer-term postwar livelihood. Some were explicit that they sought an escape from the hard and unprofitable labour associated with alluvial diamond pits.

Five of these ‘collective’ farm projects were studied by Krijn Peters in 2002–3 and followed up in 2006.<sup>8</sup> The initiatives are discussed below. Interview extracts with RUF ex-fighters illuminate how these initiatives were seen, by informants, as related to the RUF’s agrarian ideology.<sup>9</sup>

The first project discussed here was implemented on a mined-over swamp surrounded by active diamond pits in the second-largest mining area in Sierra Leone. It is somewhat different from the other four projects discussed hereafter, since one of NCDDR’s Implementing Partners (IP) was in charge of the project, rather than being it an initiative originating with the former cadres themselves. The IP provided reintegration support for ex-combatants in Tongo, including training in carpentry, soap making, construction and (in this case) farming. This project stands out because of its relatively high involvement of ex-RUF fighters (as compared to fighters from the CDF)<sup>10</sup> and because of its location (within a mining community). The land had been several times mined over, and now lay derelict. The IP and the group spokesman concurred in the symbolic value of the project – turning waste land back to agricultural purposes, through determined collective action. The ex-combatant spokesman was a former RUF colonel in charge of a G5 Unit (civil–military liaison group) responsible – together with the ‘Agric Unit’ – for organizing farming in RUF territory. He was among the first recruits to the RUF on entering Sierra Leone on 23 March 1991, and retained a clear sense of the movement’s political ambitions.

His interest in farming (as a tool for village development) related both to pre-war training and to his experiences within the RUF during the war:

*Presently, the real RUF ex-combatants are interested in farming. That will bring a better thing to Sierra Leone. You know, I was a teacher by profession before the war but now I am doing this vocation[al] training course on agriculture. I want to set up a poultry [farm]. During the time of the revolution [the war] the people who worked on the farms had at least one meal a day. Foday Sankoh stated that agriculture should be the backbone of the country. It is important to start it all at the grass-roots level: organize the villages in group formations. Alone you cannot reach anything, only in a group you can produce. (ex-RUF commander, quoted in Peters 2011, 182)*

This man was trained as a teacher at Bunumbu Teachers College, in the eastern district of Kailahun. In the 1970s and 1980s, a UNESCO project at Bunumbu encouraged a self-reliant approach to village education (Richards 2001). The college later supplied some RUF leaders,

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of these projects, see Peters (2006, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> The extracts of interviews presented below were collected during fieldwork undertaken in two periods: November 2002 to October 2003, and November to December 2006. Interviews were conducted in districts with a heavy RUF presence during the war; namely, Kenema, Kailahun, Bombali and Tonkolili. For a detailed discussion of interviewing ex-RUF combatants, see Peters (2011).

<sup>10</sup> More than 70 per cent of the participants in this specific project had an RUF background, against 15 per cent with a CDF background, while the total ex-combatants registered with the GTZ centre numbered 57 (18 ex-RUF and 39 ex-CDF) at the time of fieldwork.

such as Ibrahim Deen-Jalloh. Deen-Jalloh was an important movement ideologue, and first overall commander of G5, the unit responsible (in addition to duties mentioned above) for the ideological training of RUF cadres.

A second project, the Niawa Agricultural Development Association (NADA), was started by a group of ex-RUF commanders who demobilized in the north of Sierra Leone but travelled to Kenema district (in the east) to use their entitlements and NCDDR funding to set up a collective farm. This project involved a number of villages and was aimed – according to the initiators – at helping farmers through the promotion of a particular rice variety (ROK 3, a pure-line selection from Rokupr Rice Research Station originating in a farmer variety from Kailahun, and perhaps therefore of some symbolic significance to cadres recruited in that district). The initiators saw themselves as extension officers, needing to fill a gap left by a government that had neglected agriculture for decades. Augustine Gbao – head of RUF security – was the first chairman of the project,<sup>11</sup> but after indictment and imprisonment by the Special Court, it became clear the real driver behind the project was a hardcore group of RUF veterans who had been with the insurgency from its earliest days.

The key figure in this group was a former commander who could be described as a seasoned revolutionary. Liberian-born, he was one of a group of dissidents – about 500 strong – who took part in the failed 1985 coup attempt led by Thomas Quiwonkpa against Liberian President Samuel Doe. Subsequently, he fled Liberia for revolutionary training in Libya, and later was among the rebel forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) entering Nimba County (Liberia) from Côte d'Ivoire on Christmas Eve, 1989. He then came to Sierra Leone as one of the group of initial RUF insurgents in March 1991. Proud of his long history of fighting against oppressive regimes, his talisman or sacred text was a copy of a set of conference proceedings – *Power and Authority: Collected Readings on the Second Anniversary of the Green Book* – issued in Benghazi in 1982, and probably picked up there when he was being trained as a revolutionary. A Kpelle from northwestern Liberia, he had more in common – culturally, linguistically and historically – with the Mende and Kissi fighters who formed the bulk of the RUF rank and file than with the feared Gio fighters from northeastern Liberia, loaned to the RUF by Charles Taylor to help it become established in 1991, and accused of many of the worst war crimes committed against Sierra Leonean civilians in the name of the RUF in the first 12–14 months of the war (Richards 1996; Smith et al. 2004; Peters 2011).

The next two collective agricultural projects were located in the north, the headquarters of the RUF towards the end of the conflict. Again, the projects focused on the promotion of collective farming, and involved both war-affected youth and villagers. Both projects, the Robureh Agricultural Development Organisation and the Kalamayrah Agricultural Development Organisation, were initiated by former RUF fighters who joined the movement in the early days of the war. They also explain their involvement in farming in ideological terms. One of the RADO initiators reflected on his activities as follows:

*Right now the ideology is still in me and I continue to preach it to the people. Under Foday Sankoh, Sam Bockarie and Issa Sesay the ideology was implemented. It was only because of the AFRC that there came cracks in the ideology. I never favoured the war but the ideology was good. The fight was never for the power. And now the people can witness our ideology; while we do our farming, we preach to the people.* (ex-RUF commander, quoted in Peters, 2011, 190)

<sup>11</sup> NCDDR provided the opportunity to reluctant commanders to apply for funds to start development projects as an incentive to disarm. Gbao used this opportunity and choose his village of birth (and his family's land) for the project site. Bringing development to an area – or not arriving empty handed – was of key importance for those ex-fighters concerned about their reintegration and acceptance in their communities.

The initiator of KADO claimed to have met Sankoh before the war, when he joined a revolutionary study group in 1980, studying Marxism–Leninism. He explains his motivations and the RUF's preoccupation with agriculture in the following terms:

*Most of us [project founders] are ex-RUF, and come from the east of the country. For now, we do not want to go back there, [but we will go] only if we are able to carry this project to our home areas, so that we do not arrive with empty hands. (. . .) When you look at the struggle of the movement, it has not been for nothing. In the Western world they say it was a senseless war but the sense that came out of it is the community mind. But people only want to talk about the negative aspects. The RUF agenda was that any development could only be successful if you can feed the people. Therefore, communal agriculture was promoted because people must live on a communal level and not on an individual level . . . It was the policy of the RUF to promote farming. Agriculture makes the people self sufficient and independent from the government. A self-reliant struggle breeds a self-reliant feeding programme. (Peters 2011, 194)*

The above-mentioned failures of DDR planning become evident in this case, since most of those joining the project had received vocational skills training under DDR but failed to make a living out of it, and hence fell back on agriculture – and in particular on their experience with 'self-reliant feeding programmes' under strongly enclaved conditions in the RUF (cf. Richards 1996).

The last project to be discussed here, the Bangladesh/Sierra Leone Cooperative Farm, was located in Bombali district, spearheaded by an ex-RUF fighter in command of the area during the last days of the war. Again, the commander explained the focus and set-up of the project as a logical outgrowth of community mobilization undertaken as part of the agriculture-focused wartime aims and objectives of the RUF, the source of his belief (he claimed) that agriculture must play a key role in development:

*During the time of the revolution I went to Guinea and the Ivory Coast and there I studied agriculture for about two years. That was during the time of the '96 peace accord. The Green Revolution will always be a central line or theme in my life. Agriculture is considered as a starting up and fallback capital . . . Practical knowledge is so important. The community people do have this knowledge but they do not modernize. (. . .) The staff of the project is working on a voluntary basis, living here on the project ground so that we can tackle the problems arising straight away. It is a grass-roots project and not directed from Freetown or above. During the revolution [the war] we also were involved in farming on a voluntary basis. (Peters 2011, 189)*

It would be easy to pour scorn on opinions generated by an unsupervised group of student revolutionaries mulling over a miscellaneous collection of Cold War texts, ranging from Lenin to Kim Il Sung. On the other hand, the awareness of agriculture as a tool of group empowerment clashes with the usual picture of an opportunist, gangster movement intent only on raiding for diamonds. Here is a group of ex-fighters and ex-commanders not only holding the view that co-operative farming is a viable way for poor people to make a sustainable living in rural Sierra Leone, but prepared themselves to live and labour on a farm day in, day out as a test of their sincerity. The positioning of their views is worth further analysis.

The interest in a collective approach to farming – rather than in the individual farming packages actually supplied by DDR – is striking. Other combatants either trusted that DDR packages as supplied would lead to employment, or cynically seized what they could, and even quietly sold their tools to survive. In the case of RUF farming projects, the idea of collective action came mainly from the ex-combatants themselves. They offered a critique of the template supplied by the designers of DDR. This shows a degree of independent-mindedness that is unusual in relations between juniors and elders in Sierra Leone.



To what extent (if at all) did the five postwar co-operative projects described above succeed in carrying on the incipient agrarian agenda of the RUF? Did they, to any serious extent, evade the customary tendencies encapsulated and critiqued in the slogans referring to slavery and the 'rotten plantation system'? By the end of 2006, the five projects were visited again. Only one was still functioning, and a second was preparing to resume its activities after having had to postpone farming for a year due to land-tenure related difficulties. The other three projects had closed down due to difficulties with organizing labour and/or in securing access to land.

Leaders of RUF farming projects, as 'strangers', lacked knowledge, cash or authority to mobilize labour from the strictly limited customary pool, and were simply unable to cope with peak farming demands. The only escape would have been to cultivate new crops with different peak labour demands – dry-season vegetables, for example. But this would have needed more technical and market support than DDR was competent or willing to supply.

Interview comments show the dilemma faced by the RUF project personnel, in meeting the obligations of agrarian strangerhood, once stripped of any political or military power. One comment summed up the difficulty in a sentence:

*NADA is not really working here in Blama because they treat us as strangers; it is difficult to mobilize labour.* (ex-RUF commander, quoted in Peters 2011, 187)

In short, many of the difficulties faced by RUF postwar agrarian projects can be plausibly linked to the manner in which custom places control over land and labour in the hands of local elders, and discriminates against youth, women and strangers. This local system was temporarily disrupted when the RUF attacked chiefs and destroyed local courts, but was renovated in the course of postwar reconstruction. International sympathy for the suffering occasioned by RUF destruction made it easier for local elites, who well know how to manage the customary system in their own interests, to fend off demands for far-reaching institutional reforms. It is thus ironic that a system that limits the competitiveness of collective farming ventures by non-elite and non-local agricultural entrepreneurs has also undermined opportunities for former RUF cadres to apply positive agrarian lessons. Because of this, most of the projects discussed have closed down, with members drifting towards urban centres and mining areas, or back towards longer-term rural servitude, where they offer up their only asset – youthful energy – as cheap labour to the chiefs they once attacked. Such is the circularity at the heart of the armed struggle in Sierra Leone.

But would a revival of co-operation – the other arm of Sierra Leone's planned post-Second World War agricultural development, as outlined by Roy Lewis – have worked any better? The difficulties in setting up co-operative schemes, intended to enable those of limited status and wealth better to benefit from their labour and investments, are brought into perspective by the failures associated with a significant post-civil war co-operative mining project in Sierra Leone. In 2005, USAID's Integrated Diamond Management Programme experimented with co-operative diamond mining, drawing on part of a \$6.5 million budget to improve revenue to the community and government. Levin and Turay (2008, 2) list seven aims of the diamond co-operatives in Sierra Leone, including:

- To rationalize artisanal production (. . .);
- To provide opportunities for youth, said to be extremely important in maintaining peace and development in the country;
- To by-pass traditional middle-men 'supporters' (land-owners and dealers) (. . .);
- To empower diamond diggers to (. . .) diversify their livelihoods by eradication of the traditional 'exploitative' supporter system.



But following a negative environmental assessment, the American donor withdrew its US\$522,000 credit scheme. Private investors were found, although not to the extent that an originally planned two-year-long mining cycle could be financed. After the first year of operation, less than 10 per cent of the private investments were recovered. The weaknesses of the scheme were apparent in both the design and implementation. According to Levin and Turay (2008):

- Some diggers expressed an unwillingness to participate in the cooperatives because they were reluctant to abandon or jeopardize their relationship with dealers/supporters. In addition to everything else, patrons provide social security in the form of occasional but very important financial or political assistance in times of trouble. Trying to eradicate the supporter system without substantial changes in the dynamics of the social and political economy of a diamond digger's world was therefore naive and probably futile. (2008, 5)
- Corruption of some government officials, IDMP/PDA officials and cooperative member led to manipulation of the scheme and misdirection of funds. (. . .) One investor supported two small-scale mining enterprises alongside the cooperative in Peyima. The chief managed all three organizations, which 'opened the door for corruption' as funds were diverted from the cooperatives to the private mine. (2008, 6)
- The cooperatives were not run democratically; the executive members were selected according to social status not merit, cooperative leaders involved their family members to increase their personal benefits, information was not transmitted from the executive committee to ordinary members, and relations between members were not equal or fair, with youth members complaining of bullying and exploitation by committee members. The mode of production was very similar to the traditional systems of organizing diamond and agricultural production, with gangs of younger workers managed by older, more powerful community members. (2008, 7)

If the donors are to be believed, the project was terminated because it failed. But was this a failure of co-operation, or the result of revived patrimonialism's power to co-opt? Levin and Turay leave open the possibility that the project failed because it was stopped too soon (after just one season) (2008, 8). Co-operatives members themselves consider that the basic model was sound: 'some cooperatives had begun to sustain themselves – primarily from their farming activities – without donor and investor funding' (2008, 5). What seems clear from Levin and Turay's account is that much of the blame for apparent failure may have lain with patrimonial co-optation of the scheme by elites. Put together with the experience of the RUF ex-combatants in co-operative farming, as described above, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the patrimonial system in rural Sierra Leone remains so deeply entrenched (or has been so effectively revived by postwar donors) that it can frustrate or penetrate any co-operative system, whether in farming or mining. If postwar reconstruction has failed to address the conflictual tendencies of a deeply rooted patrimonial culture, from where might change be expected? We end with an interesting pointer to what might now happen, given the presence of significant amounts of overseas agrarian and mining capital now beginning to be invested in the Sierra Leone countryside.

#### A POSTWAR LAND INCIDENT

On 25 November 2010, a group of human rights monitors (the Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food) was alerted to an incident at Kemedugu village, near to Bumbuna in Tonkolili

District. According to the report of the monitors, the incident started when the Paramount Chief (A.B.Y. Koroma II) visited the area with officials of a large international mining company (African Minerals Limited [AML]). It had earlier been announced that the company had successfully raised \$307 million through a stock issue to develop its Sierra Leone iron ore concession – a vast project involving a mine, a hydro-project for power, a railway and a port. Company officials were anxious to start work on a dam. According to the report, various promises by the company had not yet been fully honoured. Negotiations for the land had been conducted by the Paramount Chief, and villagers protested opaque aspects of the agreement.

Many Paramount Chiefs were driven from their chiefdoms by the RUF, but were later (from 2000) restored through a scheme funded by the British aid ministry (the Department for International Development). Under British-imposed colonial indirect rule, Paramount Chiefs are considered the custodians of the land. The usufruct of farm land lies with the families that have, historically, cleared and cultivated it. Chiefs regulate disputes between farming families, but have a more substantial role with regard to non-superficial resources (crucially, in this case, minerals).

The law requires a business operator such as AML to negotiate its concession with the Paramount Chief, who is supposed to bring the land-using families on side. In the Tonkolili case, villagers suspected that the chief had not handed on all royalties paid by the company to compensate for loss of farm land. Young men of the village took direct action. AML bulldozers were stopped, company equipment destroyed and crews held hostage. The police were called, and after gathering reinforcements, made a night-time show of strength, during the course of which many villagers were driven from their homes, beaten, injured and arrested. The report claims that many items were looted in the raid, and one woman was so badly injured she could not be interviewed in hospital. Some villagers fled to the bush to escape the violence.

This could be a page out of the annals of the civil war, with a dangerous incident perpetrated by violent young men succeeded by an equally damaging raid by the forces of law and order, apparently designed to teach local civilian backers of the violent young men a lesson they would not easily forget.<sup>12</sup>

In subsequent meetings, villagers protested bitterly the loss of their land, their only source of livelihood, and lamented the inflexibility of local land rights, so that even though they might be resettled in a place with more land for farming, they would never be accepted as owners of that land, and tolerated only as strangers. A village spokesman is reported as stating that '[we] are ready to die for [our] land and that [we] would stop at nothing in defending [our] land', and alleged that 'AML wanted to start a new war in Sierra Leone and [we] are ready for that situation'. It is relevant to add that Foday Sankoh, the RUF leader, came from Tonkolili District, and that his movement took root in this area in the later stages of the war and thereafter.

## CHIEFS, YOUTHS AND THE AGRARIAN ORDER IN SIERRA LEONE

AML will provide the government of Sierra Leone with a large projected annual royalty income of \$100 million. It also promises to contribute to rural development through developing clean drinking water, roads and education. Success depends, however, on the capacity of the government to maintain public order in areas negatively affected by mining activities, and in large measure this (at present) depends on the capacity of Paramount Chiefs, as the principal

<sup>12</sup> When, after the violence at Kemedugu had died down, the chief was asked whether he felt any sympathy for the way in which villagers were brutalized by the police, he is reported to have answered: 'they deserve the treatment given to them as this will serve as a deterrent' (Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food, 2010).

resident rural agents of government charged with security. The security aspect weighed heavily with British aid officials in deciding to fund a Paramount Chief restoration programme in 1999. Evidently, the price of failure is high. The bill for the damage caused by the angry young men of Kemedugu may already amount to \$1 million.

What is the source of this propensity for youth violence? In the analysis of Abdullah (1997), built upon by others (Mkandawire 2002), it is inherent in an underclass. Wild young men, of the sort recruited into the RUF rebellion, are *raray* – the Krio word for rootless. What is not analysed is the source of their rootlessness, and its strong associations with rural as well as urban life. Mkandawire (2002) suggests that the causes cannot spring from rural conditions, since African peasantries are not obviously exploited by a landlord class. Analysis of the agrarian history of Sierra Leone challenges this view.

The war offered an unsustainable reversion to the warrior option, and war-weariness set in. Since the fighting ended, international investors have scrambled for land leases and mining concessions in Sierra Leone. Under the system of customary land rights, different stakeholders see themselves as enjoying different powers. Low-status families – perhaps of slave background – stress rights acquired through usage, and in clinging to a right not formally defined, in effect also support the customary system as managed by chiefs, to the exclusion of other low-status potential users, such as the RUF ‘strangers’ described above. Chiefs, on the other hand, view their rights and privileges in quasi-constitutional terms, under laws inherited from colonialism, and assume responsibility to broker deals with high-status outsiders, such as companies. Leases are signed, but as the law stands, chiefs and land-owning families can abrogate agreements more or less at will. Chiefs trust that if the situation changes – if a community starts to run short of farming land, for instance – they will always be able to renegotiate the terms, and dampen down dissent by redistributing some additional *ad hoc* rental payments. But the situation is fraught with danger, since the rumour mill is always liable to inflate accounts of any amounts so granted.

International best practice demands that land concession acquisitions be accompanied by often quite elaborate community consultations. These are not always what they seem. They are skilfully managed by attentive chiefs. In one recent instance, we observed a consultation for land by a large internationally funded biofuel project where the facilitator’s suggestion to break out interest groups of elders, women and young men for separate consultations was immediately opposed by the chiefs present, on the grounds that people would feel uncomfortable unless they met village-by-village in a circle of people they knew and trusted. This sounded very reasonable, but the effect was to ensure that each mini-debate was policed by a representative of the chiefly interest, and no awkward objections were raised. The only questions of substance in the subsequent plenary session came from village chiefs themselves, or on occasion a village teacher, and were either anodyne requests for detailed information, or praise for the authorities in bringing such an obviously beneficial development to the area. One village spokesman even asked how the group in question could contribute more land than had been asked. Observers unaware of the extent to which the consultation had been managed to minimize awkward questions might have gone away satisfied that best practice had been observed, that people had an abundance of land, and that they were happy to contribute it to the scheme (cf. Murphy 1990). None of the issues apparent in the Kemedugu incident came into the open in the biofuel consultation. Kemedugu has the appearance of local resentment bottled to a point at which it burst.

A land tenure system that continues to exclude internal low-caste agrarian initiative, of the sort proposed by some elements in the former RUF, while, at the same time, riding roughshod over local interests in order to accommodate international investors – faces double jeopardy. It

risks alienating both rebels and the local underclass supporters of custom. It threatens – in short – to unite in common cause the two militarized class fractions – RUF and CDF – opposed by the recent civil war. That poses a truly daunting challenge. Land reform to protect and support sustainable livelihoods for both constituencies seems to be a requirement for any longer-term peace in Sierra Leone. But it also seems pertinent to speculate that international investors, threatened with persistent insecurity and low-level sabotage might either withdraw, or put pressure on government to sort out the longer-term cause of trouble. This might in turn lead to a new interest in restraining rural elites in the interest, if not of the nation, of the political elites drawing their power from centralized resources. It may be predicted that the customary rural order, currently comfortable in its international reinstatement, will come under renewed pressure for change.

## CONCLUSION

The agrarian lessons of the conflict in Sierra Leone have yet to be fully learned. The RUF was by origin a small splinter from a larger student protest movement, and analysts have failed to appreciate how quickly, under pressure of survival, it outgrew its urban, elite origins, and became an outlet for a mixed rural group locked out of agrarian pathways to self-realization. Elements in the movement recognized that for survival, if for no other reason, the RUF had to develop an agrarian orientation, and some cadres continued to pursue this objective during the period of demobilization, by making use of the limited agricultural training initiatives on offer. Ex-RUF postwar farming projects ran into problems over both land and labour access, confirming their inability to deal with the dead hand of tradition in rural Sierra Leone. The intended agrarian revolution failed. More recently, a new business-friendly political regime has turned to international investors, offering them generous land leases on favourable terms. These leases may be beneficial to the state, and to those who help to broker them, but they are also perceived as a threat to the livelihoods of peasant supporters of agrarian tradition (the loyalist faction in the civil war). As the Kemedugu incident suggests, it might not now take much to bring together opposed elements in the civil war in common agrarian cause. Renewed rural disturbances – uniting rebels and civil defence – would threaten the new international sources of investment, especially in agriculture. Large-scale farming projects are in their nature extensive, and less easily ring-fenced for security than deep-mining projects. This insecurity might then prove to be the goad to propel a long-delayed political reform of the customary agrarian order and local land tenure regimes.

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